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### **A narrative pattern analysis of primary process language and body boundary imagery in discourse of religious-mystical and psychotic altered states of consciousness**

#### **Citation for published version:**

Cariola, LA 2012, 'A narrative pattern analysis of primary process language and body boundary imagery in discourse of religious-mystical and psychotic altered states of consciousness', The 16th Annual Meeting of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness, Brighton, United Kingdom, 2/07/12 - 6/07/12.

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#### **Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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# Assessing the narrative patterns of body boundary imagery and regressive imagery in discourses of religious-mystical and psychotic experiences - A case study



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## Introduction

Primordial cognition and changes in body boundary awareness have been identified as shared phenomenological features in both mystical and psychotic altered states of consciousness (ASC) (e.g., Prince & Savage, 1966). Computer-assisted content analysis has identified that the narrative pattern of linguistic variables associated to regressive states (i.e., primordial thought language and penetration imagery) follow a fifth polynomial degree curve in religious texts (West, 1991; Wilson, 2009). Thus, this study investigated the narrative pattern of body boundary and primordial imagery in the discourses of mystical and psychotic experiences to explore the notion of adaptive and maladaptive regression (Balint, 1968), and the dynamical function and interaction of primordial language, body boundary imagery, and emotion language in ASC.

The mystical discourse here is Saint Teresa of Avila's (1567) "*The Way of Perfection*", and the psychotic discourse is Daniel Paul Schreber's (1903) autobiographical writing "*Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*".

It was hypothesized that primordial thought language and penetration imagery will follow a fifth polynomial degree curve in the religious-mystical and psychotic text.

## Objective measures

Body Type Dictionary (BTD) (Wilson, 2006) measures barrier imagery and penetration imagery based on Fisher & Cleveland's (1958) scoring system of high and low body boundary personality.

Regressive Imagery Dictionary (RID) (Martindale, 1990) measures primordial and conceptual thought language, and emotion language.

## Results

### Religious-mystical text

Primordial thought language ( $BIC = 131.44$ ,  $R^2_{ML} = 0.20$ ,  $LR(7,9) = 9.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ) followed a quadratic trend in form of a prolonged inverted bell curve, and penetration imagery was modelled with a quadric polynomial fit ( $BIC = 97.58$ ,  $R^2_{ML} = 0.22$ ,  $LR(7,11) = 10.75$ ,  $p < .05$ ) with a homogenous fall-rise-fall-rise pattern. Both curves coincided in the driving force of their rise-fall pattern (approx. chapter 10-40) (see Figure 1-2), and thus indicating an adaptive regression in the mystical fusion experience that might reflect the integrative state of purgation in which the mystic is assumed to confront and clarify aspects of the false self and unconscious conflicts. The new insight results in a whole-object and self-representation (Klein, 1935, 1946). The adjustment of existing meaning structures that might lead to adaptive behavioural changes and enhancement of the true self.

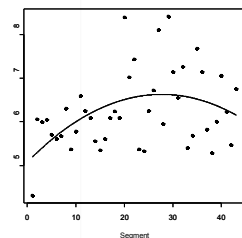


Figure 1 – Quadratic polynomial trend of primary process language in the religious-mystical text.

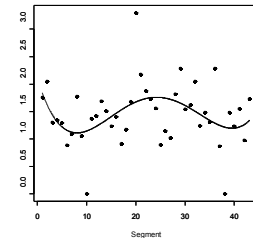


Figure 2 – Quadratic polynomial trend of penetration imagery in the religious-mystical text.

## Results continued

### Psychotic text

Primordial thought language followed an inverted cubic trend ( $BIC = 104.74$ ,  $R^2_{ML} = 0.35$ ,  $LR(7,10) = 13.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (see Figure 3), showing a dysfunctional self-reparative function within regressive states of psychotic disorders and an inability to gain whole-object representation (Klein, 1946).

Barrier imagery ( $BIC = 89.81$ ,  $R^2_{ML} = 0.03$ ,  $LR(7,10) = 7.66$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and glory lexis ( $BIC = 52.77$ ,  $R^2_{ML} = 0.65$ ,  $LR(7,10) = 32.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ) showed an inverted cubic trend (see Figure 4-5). Penetration imagery ( $BIC = 109.69$ ,  $R^2_{ML} = 0.14$ ,  $LR(7,8) = 4.85$ ,  $p < .05$ ) indicated a positive linear curve (see Figure 6-7).

High barrier imagery and glory lexis might function as a narcissistic defence to exclude trauma experiences from conscious awareness to protect the ego from threatening annihilating insights. In such a dynamic, high barrier imagery represents a competing driving force that inhibits the blurring of body boundaries and the ability to confront unconscious conflicts in the regressive state, and thus leading to the continuous disintegration/splitting of existing meaning structures.

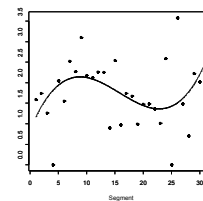


Figure 4 - Inverted cubic trend of barrier imagery in the psychotic text

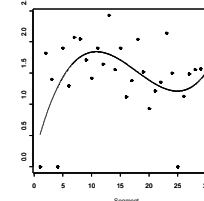


Figure 5 - Inverted cubic trend of glory lexis in the psychotic text

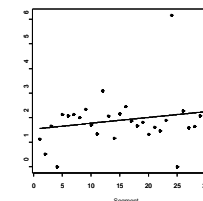


Figure 6 - Linear trend of penetration lexis in the psychotic text

## Conclusion

The function of body boundary and primordial regression differed between religious-mystical and psychotic experiences. In the religious-mystical text, the blurring of body boundaries corresponded with the driving force to confront and resolve unconscious conflicts, indicating an adaptive primordial regression. In the psychotic text, however, barrier imagery maintained the narcissistic equilibrium that excludes unconscious conflicts from conscious awareness, such as trauma experiences, and therefore restrains and overrides the driving force to gain new insights and to change dysfunctional meaning structures, representing a maladaptive primordial regression.

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**Acknowledgments** I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Andrew Wilson for his support.